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Care of the Soul: Service-Learning and the Value of the Humanities

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Contemporary debates about the proper role of the humanities in college and university education have been shaped by a multitude of exigencies and trends both within and outside of the academy, from ordinary budgetary constraints to changing institutional and professional norms, and from increasingly consumerist attitudes about education to the emergence of new media and communications technology. Value pluralism, recognition of the importance of cultural diversity, and processes of globalization have led to ongoing and sometimes quite heated discussion about curricular content. Moreover, the remarkable achievements of the natural sciences, which have yielded so many practical gains, only heighten the anxiety of those who would seek to determine just what "use" the humanities serve. While some of the terminology in these debates may be new—witness the pressure on instructors across disciplines to specify measurable "learning objectives" and "outcomes assessments"—the underlying questions are not so different from those which motivated Matthew Arnold's classic defense of the humanities over a century ago. The "humane letters," Arnold argues, uniquely engage our emotions and exercise a valuable influence on our conduct and sense of beauty. Arnold's conclusion is that the humanities are not "in much actual danger of being thrust out from their leading place in education…So long as human nature is what it is, their attractions will remain irresistible" (Arnold 1975, 72).

According to a new book by Anthony Kronman, the humanities have lost not only their leading position in post-secondary education, but, more important, their relevance in guiding students through a critical examination of what it means to live a good life as a human being (Kronman 2007). Kronman places much of the blame for this

loss squarely on the shoulders of those who work in the humanities. In our aspiration to realize a misplaced research ideal, it is we, Kronman suggests, who have renounced what was once widely understood to be—and, indeed, what should be—the principal goal of an education in the humanities, namely, the disciplined pursuit of ultimate questions about the meaning of life. Stanley Fish, by contrast, is suspicious of the notion that members of the professoriate are especially effective at or well qualified to direct others in such a pursuit, and so he reaches a very different conclusion. Because the humanities fail to "bring about effects in the world," their only justification lies in the pleasure experienced by those who enjoy studying them.

By locating the potential value of the humanities in either observable practicable results or the subjective experience of pleasure, Fish's conclusion is based on a false dichotomy. Even if the humanities don't "do" anything useful "in the world" in the way that, say, accounting programs perform useful social and economic functions by training a necessary group of professionals, the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that are cultivated through a serious study of the humanities still do something quite significant for students. Robert Pippin's conception of the aims of liberal education is instructive in this regard (Pippin 2000). Pippin reminds us that the humanities, along with the other liberal arts, contribute in an essential way to the good of human freedom. Freedom as liberality of mind consists in the ability to stand in the right relation to one's convictions, values and identity: that is, to acknowledge them as one's own by being able to give a reasoned account of why one believes, values, or identifies with this or that. Having good reasons typically depends upon weighing evidence, engaging in dialogue with others, responding to their criticisms, and, as Kronman rightly emphasizes, considering traditional claims about and illustrations of the true, the good, and the beautiful in history, literature, philosophy, and the arts.

At the same time, Kronman's book is not without its shortcomings. I suspect that the simplistic understandings of diversity and multiculturalism which he associates with the demise of the humanities are not nearly as widespread or damaging as he would have us believe and so are something of a straw man. More germane to my

own experiences teaching in the humanities is his treatment of religion. According to Kronman's somewhat stylized history of American higher education, the humanities flourished in their proper role during the era of the so-called ideal of secular humanism—that is, from roughly the 1860s to the 1960s—when they provided the opportunity for exploring rival frameworks of meaning in an increasingly pluralistic and disenchanted world. That ideal affirms neither religious dogma nor radical doubt; but it is distinct from religious conceptions of a well-lived life. All religions, Kronman maintains, are "fundamentalist" in the weak sense that they reject the "ultimate pluralism of values" and demand acknowledgment of supernatural realities that are inaccessible to human reason (Kronman 2007, 199). Kronman regretfully admits that, given the recent abandonment of the secular humanist ideal, the most influential institutions providing instruction today in the question of life's meaning are religious institutions, and he cites as evidence of this fact language from the mission statements of Oral Roberts, Regent, and Liberty University (Kronman 2007, 200 and 292, n. 41).

Many of the religiously affiliated colleges and universities in the U.S., however, are quite unlike the particular examples cited by Kronman. Some, like my own institution, are rooted in a vibrant intellectual tradition according to which there is no final inconsistency between the demands of faith and the claims of reason. Moreover, just as in the case of some religious convictions, skeptical and naturalistic attitudes and beliefs are sometimes adopted uncritically and even dogmatically. To be sure, Kronman would recommend that students in the humanities encounter reasoned challenges to both religious and nonreligious worldviews. But it's far from obvious that this goal is best accomplished by following the ideal of secular humanism, whatever its other merits. It may turn out that this educational goal, along with the more general aim of critically examining rival frameworks of meaning, demands that questions in epistemology and the philosophy of religion be recognized as central to the humanities curriculum, as they are at many Catholic institutions. Kronman is right to insist on a renewal of the humanistic alternative to various fundamentalisms. But it's just as important that questions about God, the divine, faith and the rationality (or irration-

ality) of religious belief are not dismissed altogether, as they might be by students who would equate all forms of religious commitment with "fundamentalism."

Kronman observes that the meaning of life is perhaps a more familiar and pressing matter for us when put in the form of the question, "What, in the end, should I care about?" (Kronman 2007, 23). My own view is that teachers and students must respond to this question intellectually, but not without also considering its affective, practical, and spiritual dimensions. What I care about is revealed in part by what I believe on due reflection and value as good or beautiful, and in part by what I do and how I respond emotionally to others and to the world we share. Thus one of the ways that college and university communities can care for the whole person and facilitate student reflection on the question of what to care about is by organizing and encouraging meaningful activities outside of the classroom which complement traditional forms of academic learning.

Service-learning, an academic program that combines academic coursework with sustained reflection on regular community service, is one such example. My own experiences at Jesuit universities, first as a graduate student and then as a faculty member, suggest that the humanities provide a natural home for this particularly effective method of combining intellectual inquiry, practical engagement, relationship building, and self-reflection. In my service-learning sequence of introductory philosophy courses, students examine long standing philosophical and moral problems in light of their experiences working in service placements. So an examination of the problem of free will and determinism is complemented by the experiences of getting to know addicts and recovering addicts. Examination of the social nature of the person is complemented by discussions of solidarity through service work; the problem of evil by reflections on human suffering; the meaning of race by consideration of the demographics of Philadelphia; end-of-life issues by students working at nursing homes; moral questions concerning impairments and disabilities by students serving wheelchair communities; theories of distributive justice by stories from soup kitchens and homeless outreach agencies—and so on. Service experienc-

es contribute to our academic objectives by providing illustrations, concrete examples, and counter-examples, as well as sources of insight, inspiration, and wonder. At the same time, student reflection on both service and the social problems to which their service sites respond is more informed and disciplined when it is connected to a careful study of philosophical texts.

In these courses, the question of what one should care about is always at least in the background, even when more specific philosophical problems and moral controversies occupy our class readings and conversation. At other times, the question is addressed directly through an encounter with classic works in philosophy. For instance, students begin my introductory course on the "Human Person" by making their way through Plato's *Apology* and *Republic*, with special attention paid to Socrates' investigation of how and why young people are attracted to various goals and projects. My second course, "Moral Philosophy," revisits Plato's question of the relationship between happiness and morality by turning to Mill's defense of the higher pleasures, Kant's ideal of the morally good will, and Aristotle's treatment of the different models of friendship which contribute to a happy and virtuous life.

It is unlikely that these courses could be shown to have "saved" anyone, but that's not the term I would use to characterize their purpose in the first place. Indeed, one of the lessons that students learn through their service is just how difficult it is for one person to save another. But, especially among first-year students, these courses do, I think, often have an impact, and sometimes a transformative impact, on the kind of persons that students become over the next few years, on their academic and non-academic interests, their sense of responsibility, and the choices that they make about how to participate in campus life. My hope is that students learn to care for themselves, for what Socrates calls the "best possible state of [the] soul," by pursuing the sorts of questions that he asked and by serving and caring for others (Plato 1975, 32). There are more possibilities in heaven and earth than are dreamt of, apparently, in Professor Fish's philosophy.

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